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AUTHOR Ilyin, Donna
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ABSTRACT

Even though modern methods of teaching emphasize listening and speaking, seldom are students of English tested in a standardized way on their ability to communicate through these skills. Many people learn to communicate well enough to conduct daily affairs in a new language, yet are unable to read, write, or speak any educated form of it. They are often required to take tests designed for native speakers or for foreign students entering colleges and universities in the United States. Such tests are inappropriate and too difficult for most students enrolled in adult school ESL (English as a Second Language) courses. These students need tests designed and developed on adult school ESL students. They especially need tests that measure their ability to understand and communicate orally--even if inaccurately. This paper describes the development and field testing of an oral interview designed to assess oral communication in a contextual setting. While the test is easy to administer, examiners must become familiar with its uniqueness. It is hoped that the interview will be useful to ESL programs, basic education programs, industry, and employment agencies in more objectively assessing foreign and second language speakers' oral levels of English proficiency. (Author)

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Assessing Oral Communication in Adult Program English Second Language Classes

by

DONNA ILYIN

FL 007286

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Assessing Oral Communication in Adult Program English Second Language Classes[1]

Even though modern methods of teaching emphasize listening and speaking, seldom are students of English--or any language--tested in a standardized way on their ability to communicate through these skills. Many people learn to communicate well enough to conduct daily affairs in a new language, yet are unable to read, write or speak any educated form of it. If they enroll in an adult school, they are often required to take tests designed for native speakers or for foreign students entering colleges and universities in the United States. Such tests are inappropriate and too difficult for most students enrolled in adult school ESL (English as a Second Language) courses. These students need tests designed, developed and normed on adult school ESL students. They need diagnostic tests, oral comprehension tests and now with the emphasis on reading in federally funded programs, they need reading comprehension tests. They especially need tests that measure their ability to understand and communicate orally--even if inaccurately. (Lane, 1973 p. 66).

Native Speaker Tests

Primarily because of an erroneous yet persistent notion that attainment of literacy or elementary education in English is the same as the acquisition of language, attempts are made to test students in adult ESL or ABE (Adult Basic Education) programs with native speaker tests which assign them to native speaking children's grade levels. (Tsou and McKay, 1971 and City of Oakland 1975 p. 24. Lane 1973 p. 64.)

Assigning foreign speakers to children's grade levels based on education in the United States is totally inappropriate. It is harmful and misleading. Too often it is assumed that if people cannot speak or read English, they are stupid, slow, and undereducated in any language. It is also assumed that when adults cannot speak and read English well enough to take native speaker tests designed for children (even if rewritten for adults), they are slow or lazy or culturally deprived as well as uneducated. The truth is that these adult students (often well educated in their own language and possessing deep cultural qualities) just haven't been exposed to enough English to take the native speaker tests. They should not take native speaker tests before they have reached the upper intermediate adult ESL proficiency level (see Table 1 next page).

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[1]This paper is an updated revision of a paper entitled "Placing Adults in ESL Classes by Guess or by Test?" presented at the TESOL Convention in New Orleans, March 3-7, 1971. Parts were edited by Vicki Spandel for the publication MES: Client Assessment compiled by Alicia D. Ramirez for Western Area Manpower Institute, 1975.

Table 1 - RANGES OR MEDIAN SCORES OF STUDENTS IN ADULT PROGRAM ESL ON VARIOUS TESTS*

LEVEL	An Adult Test	College Foreign Student Tests						A Native Speaker Test
	EPT	TOEFL	FLI MTELP	ELI AURAL	ELI STRUCT.	CELT LIST.	CELT STRUCT.	RFU
	raw scores	equated	%	%	%	%	%	grades
	A/B							
BEGINNING								
100	0-19	BELOW 350 (NIL)						
200	20-29							
INTERMEDIATE								2.9
300	30-39 G/H	BELOW 425 (ELEMENTARY)				40		3.5
400	0-19							
ADVANCED						46	41	
500	20-29	BELOW 500 (INTERMEDIATE)						
600	30-50		54	59	54	64	51	7.0
COMPLETION OF ADULT PROGRAM, ESL			64	67	76	66	67	
COMPLETION OF ADULT PROGRAM, COLLEGE PREPATORY CLASS			73	76	82			

* For test references, see: ILYIN 1970, 71 and 72; TOEFL 1963 to present, Upshur 1961-64, Pilsbury 1963, Harris 1971, and Thurstone, 1969.

After students reach intermediate levels they can take some tests designed for native speakers. If students do not have a fifth grade education in any language, or if students desire to get a GED or some other U.S. educational certificate, they may need to be placed into reading or mathmatics levels in an adult basic education program. Some unwitting employers require minority applicants to take tests designed for native speakers that are based on children's grade levels. Upper intermediate and advanced level students may want the practice of taking this type of test (Karlsen, Madden and Gardner, 1967, and Tabe, 1967, and Thurston, 1969).

College Foreign Born Tests

Sometimes adult students are given tests designed for college level foreign students who have studied English for many years before coming to the United States. These tests usually do possess language proficiency rather than assigning persons to children's educational grade levels in the United States. The tests, however, set standards of readiness for entering colleges, universities or intensive English programs which prepare foreign students for college work in the United States. Even when adult students have high school diplomas from other countries--or for that matter, college or university degrees--if they have had little or no exposure to English, they cannot understand or read enough English to take tests designed for foreign-born college students. (Harris and Palmer, 1971; Pillsbury, Thrasher and Upshur, 1963; and Upshur, Palmer and Harris, 1961-1964.)

College level foreign student tests are too difficult. They do not establish any realistic guidelines for beginning adult students. (See Table 1.) For example, on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), many students who are quite capable of surviving and communicating orally in English would receive a nil proficiency rating. This doesn't give us much information. Perhaps we need nil 1, nil 2, nil 3, etc.

What TOEFL considers elementary proficiency, we in adult programs consider an indication of readiness for intermediate adult instruction. This means either 1) entrance into a basic education program if the student's educational level is below fifth grade in his native language; or 2) continued ESL instruction combined with vocational or academic instruction to bring English ability up to other educational skill levels.

Need for Special ESL Tests for Adult School Programs

Many students in adult ESL classes study to acquire a working knowledge of English that will enable them to deal with everyday life, to find employment, and to upgrade their employability skills. Many of these adults in ESL classes--beginning through advanced--have college and university goals.

Until students reach intermediate and advanced levels in adult ESL proficiency programs, however, attempts to place them or to demonstrate their achievement through inappropriate and difficult

tests is threatening, harmful and extremely misleading. Beginning adult ESL program students fear inappropriate and difficult tests, and often will not return to class if these tests are given. What is seemingly overlooked is that anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of students enrolled in adult program ESL are in these beginning levels of proficiency (Ilyin, 1971 and 1976 and Ilyin, Best and Biagi, 1972). These students need tests that do not frighten them, that do not ask them to read something they do not understand, and that give practical and realistic results. They especially need tests that measure understanding and speaking ability.

As an alternative to inappropriate and difficult tests, tests that require reading, or mere guesswork, I have developed a controlled oral interview--hereafter referred to as the "Ilyin Oral Interview"--which places students by testing their ability to answer and ask questions orally, in an interview based entirely on pictures. This test identifies not only the person who can answer appropriately and speak correctly, but also the person who understands sufficiently to respond with the correct information, but whose structural language patterns and grammar are often incorrect.

Problems of Interviews

Any test that measures speaking ability requires administration time. Each student is tested individually. Most often interviews are used to measure speaking ability and seldom reflect more than guesswork. Most oral interviews tend to have rather low reliability.

Increasing reliability is time-consuming since it requires that each interview be graded by two or three examiners, using a subjective rating scale. These subjective scores are then averaged to arrive at a more equitable grade for each individual tested (Harris, 1969, p. 85). Interviews requiring set standards of scoring and more than one examiner are seldom possible in any adult program.

For placement purposes, counselors and administrators generally rely on a kind of guesswork that poses as an oral interview. These "interviews" are usually conducted in English, with varying degrees of success in establishing rapport and communication. Often the student has a willing friend or relative who translates, helps, or even answers for him or her, thereby introducing a third variable into the "guesswork." If the interview is conducted in the student's first language, placement may be based on talking about English, rather than actually speaking English.

The Ilyin Oral Interview, with its set pattern of scoring, is more consistent. The interview requires only one examiner per individual tested. This shortens the length of time usually required for an interview. A friendly, relaxed person who understands the test, and can read in a conversational way can give the test; and most educated, objective people can score it. Many paraprofessionals and aides have been highly successful in giving the interview.

Reliability figures on the test itself are high, although no reliability study has been made on persons scoring the test. The test is not too difficult for students who speak some English, and is designed to prevent frustration and fear of failure.

Defined levels of oral proficiency are emerging. Further studies on the first edition, scorer reliability studies, and native speaker samples are needed.

Background on Test Development of the Interview

Beginning editions of the test were administered to students in migrant worker adult ESL programs in Illinois, and to students in adult ESL and special vocational programs in urban areas of California. Later, in order to develop an experimental edition, more than 700 students in adult ESL courses and vocational programs in San Francisco were tested. These students ranged in age from 18 to 63, and came from Asian, Latin American, European, and Middle Eastern countries. Some had worked with native speakers; others had experienced little contact with oral English except in class. Educational levels in the students' own languages varied from fourth grade through completion of college. Length of time in the United States ranged from six months to 20 years.

For the first edition, research was based on the testing of 200 students in adult ESL classes in San Francisco, as well as over 700 students in various other programs throughout Canada and the United States.[2] The samples included students in college level intensive English classes for foreign students, as well as students in manpower training, private industry, and elementary or high school ESL programs. As expected, there was wide variance in goals, ages, education, language backgrounds, length of instruction in English, years spent in the United States and extent of contact with native speakers.

Research and field testing of an experimental edition published in 1972, indicated a need for a shorter administration time, a quicker method of scoring, revision of some items and pictures, a reordering of the more difficult items as well as a need to publish the manual of instructions in the test booklet itself rather than in a separate book which was easily lost.

Description of the Interview (First Edition)

There are two forms of the test, entitled, respectively, Bill and Tom. The examiner uses one of these forms with corresponding

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[2] Assistance was provided by many people--really too many to mention. Some of the most complete studies took many hours--far more than were necessary for the projects M.A. candidates were required to do. I would especially like to express my appreciation to Dorothy Danielson, who directed the work, and to the following for great efforts in helping me with the research: Terrance Carlman, Joan Hanford, Judith Laws Hoyem, Valorie Howard, Louise McDonald and Leanna Rosenbaum.

pictures. In a relaxed, conversational setting, he reads controlled items about pictures in the book and records the student's score. The student sees only the pictures. Time limits are flexible since in the first part the examiner terminates the test at the frustration level--that is, when a student is unable to understand a number of items in succession.

The examiner scores responses immediately by simply circling as follows:

2 - 1 - (0) The answer is inappropriate or unintelligible (Grammar and structure may or may not be correct).

2 - (1) - 0 The answer is appropriate and intelligible (There are one or more mistakes in grammar or structure).

(2) - 1 - 0 The answer is appropriate and intelligible and the grammar is perfect (no mistakes, even little ones).

When administration time is even more restricted, the examiner can use only 30 of the most discriminating items. These 30 items, which are marked, were selected from the original 50 items on the basis of an item analysis study of high and low scorers in a sample of 100 students.

Test Adaption for a Mass Listening Test

If there are not enough examiners available to give the interview on a one-to-one basis, and if students are able to write their own responses (even if incorrectly spelled), it is possible for a teacher to give the interview to a class as a mass listening test. Individual student booklets containing only pictures can be made by duplicating the picture's pages only. The teacher reads each item, and students look at the appropriate picture page and write their answers.

Students never see any written form of the items either in the Oral Interview or in the mass listening test. Teachers score written answers with the two point system. Spelling is not graded, and the student is told in advance that it will not be graded. However, the teacher may still want to make an overall rating of a student's ability to spell.

Orientation to Oral Interview

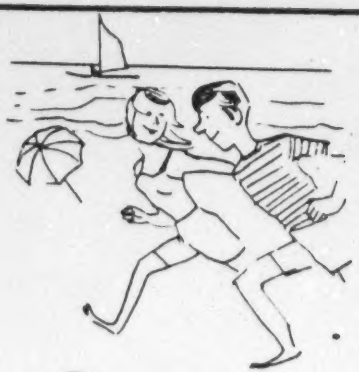
As an orientation to the interview, the examiner shows the student the pictures (see Table 2 next page) and tells the student that the pictures are all about the same man. He shows him where the time is indicated and explains the system showing the man's activities for Last Sunday (a weekend day), Today and Tommorrow (as weekdays), and tells a story about the man's activities in the pictures. (The alternate booklet has Yesterday and Today as weekdays, and Next Saturday as a weekend day.) The examiner checks to see that the student understands this system before he begins the test.

TABLE 2

LAST SUNDAY

9:55

10:25



11:00-5:00

TODAY

7:15

7:45

8:00-11:50

11:50-12:30

TOMORROW

7:15

7:45

8:00-11:50

11:50-12:30

-7-

Items

Sample items from each level of instruction have been selected and arranged according to difficulty. Earlier items include questions like "Who is this man?" and "What is he doing in this picture?" Later questions include such items as "If his television is broken, what do you think Bill will be doing?" To elicit questions in the first part of the interview, the examiner shows the student a picture in the "past" series and tells him to ask a question about the picture. As one of the items in the last part, the examiner shows the student a picture and tells him to ask a question using the word which. The next item in the series requires the student to answer his own question.

Although a conversational tone is maintained throughout the interview, the student is asked to answer in complete sentences. He often responds with a quick word or phrase, but is prompted to give a more complete answer so that structural accuracy can be properly assessed. He is encouraged to ask that questions or instructions be repeated unless it becomes obvious that he is asking for repetitions only to gain time and that he doesn't understand. In that case the examiner goes on to another question.

The length of the interview varies with a student's proficiency. When the items become too difficult for the student, the examiner repeats a simple instruction or question, to which the student can respond, before terminating the interview. In this way the student is left with a feeling of success.

Scoring Examples

To see more clearly how scoring works, look at the following sample items and possible student answers (for the pictures on which these items are based, see Table 2, page 7).

Examiner	Candidate	Score
8. How does Bill go to school?	He go walking to school.	8. 2-(1)-0
9. Where does he eat his lunch on weekdays?	They eat after school.	9. 2-1-(0)
10. When does he eat lunch on weekdays?	Is at 11:50 minutes to 12 and a half.	10. 2-(1)-0
11. Is he going to be eating lunch tomorrow at 12:15?	Oh, no.	
Good. Tell me a complete sentence.	No, he isn't.	11. (2)-1-0

In number nine, where the information was not correct or appropriate, structure and grammar were not scored. In number ten, the student omitted it, or lunch, and made several errors in the time phrase; but no words are out of order, and a variation to the answer could be "It (meaning lunch) is at 11:50, or from 11:50 to 12:30."

A student is not rated lower for accented pronunciation or for unusual intonation patterns, as long as he is intelligible and his answer appropriate. For instance, on an early part of the test the examiner might point to a picture of the man sitting in front of a TV and ask, "What is Bill doing in this picture?" If the student replies, "He washing TV," he would be given points for information. His mistakes are in pronunciation and verb form; he did not say is or put an 's on he. That error is structural. Of course, no one ever "washes" TV, but everyone would understand him in this context. The score on this item would be 1. The main concerns are:

1. Can a native speaker of English understand him?
2. Is his information correct according to the context?
3. Are the structural patterns correct?

Placement

Complete information on how students should be placed, what their oral levels of performance are or will be after a given period of time, or how these levels of performance relates to job skills, cannot be available until the first edition has been published and more research completed. However, a pattern is emerging and guidelines are provided for placement into the ESL levels of instruction used in San Francisco (ESL Master Plan Phase II, 1972).

Each program is encouraged to test its students, and to use the guidelines suggested in the interview until the individual program can set its own realistic entry level and terminal scores for given amounts of time. In this way, most students or workers who attend programs regularly can reach a realistic proficiency level established for the end of the course or training period.

Length of Course Instruction

There are a number of factors that affect time necessary to complete a particular level: age, number of dependents, prior to exposure to English, literacy in the native language, type and nature of the native language, educational background and even marital status affect success in language proficiency courses. Apparently, no correlation has been found between a student's sex and his ability to learn a language; nor between economic background and language learning, or length of stay in the United States and language learning (City of Oakland, 1974, p. 25). Other well known factors that affect the rate of learning or time spent in a particular ESL level of proficiency include student's motivation, the climate of the classroom, and the teacher's understanding of individual students' needs as well as ESL learns' specific needs.

At Alemany adult center where the EPT tests were developed, the number of hours necessary for completion of a particular level of instruction varied from 350 to 500 hours. Some students completed two levels of instruction in that same time span, while others spent from 700 to 1,000 hours completing only one level of instruction. Not all students come in with no proficiency and stay until the end of the advanced program. Sixty to seventy percent

of the students enrolled are in the first two beginning levels, twenty to twenty-five percent in the intermediate levels, and the rest in the advanced levels. It is at the intermediate levels that students want to combine their English instruction with other educational or training goals. They leave Alemany Adult School (Primarily English Language Proficiency School) for the following reasons:

- -To enroll in basic education subjects in other schools when their general educational level is below fifth grade in any language
- -To enroll in vocationally oriented programs or subsidized programs
- -To work at a job requiring minimal language skills in English
- -To enter junior college special programs
- -To enroll in college EFL intensive English courses for entry into four year college and university work

Test Statistics and Norms

Research studies on the experimental edition have been voluntary, with different examiners interested in different aspects of research. Reliability figures are high, and correlation studies with other measures of aural proficiency show a marked relationship. There is also a relationship between test results and teachers' opinions of students' communicative ability. This correlation is considerably higher for students in adult program ESL than for those in college intensive programs. The 30 item test and the quicker two point scoring system appear to be as reliable as the total test of 50 items and the longer four point scoring system.

The interview reflects better placement in the earlier levels, where aural/oral skills are stressed, than in the advanced levels. It seems suitable for use in the followint types of programs:

- -Adult ESL and ABE readiness programs
- -Junior college lower ESL levels
- -Intensive EFL courses preparing students for four year colleges
- -Vocational programs, federal training projects and private companies working on upgrading minority employees

The interview is too easy, however, for students already taking regular college or university work.

Four Studies

1. Using the 50 item experimental edition and long scoring system.

Description of the four reference groups

A. Students in two adult center day ESL programs in San Francisco. Language proficiency and educational background, as well as length of English instruction and time in the United States varied widely. Ages ranged from 18 to 75. Students were placed into six levels of adult ESL instruction by the EPT Placement tests and by teachers' recommendations. The students in the vocational 200 class were selected by their primary goal of finding a job in addition to their ESL level. Interviews were given in the middle of the course. The regular level interviews were conducted by five graduate students in a TEFL Master's program. The vocational 200 interviews were conducted by a teacher/counselor.

B. French speaking students in Canada in an intensive English program preparing for college and university work. Students had completed secondary school and had had three to four years of formal, traditional English instruction. Ages were 18 to 25. Placement into two levels of instruction were based on scores obtained from the MTELP and the ELI Aural Achievement Test. Interviews were given during the last two weeks of a six week aural/oral program by an instructor with an M.A. in TEFL.

C. Foreign students in a full time intensive language training program in California. All had completed secondary school. Language background and length of previous English instruction varied widely. Placement into five levels of instruction was based on scores received on TOEFL. Interviews were given during the middle of the program by two graduate students enrolled in a TEFL M.A. program.

D. Employees in a large New York on-the-job upgrading program. Second dialect speakers as well as speakers of many different foreign languages were included in the group. All had had good work records, but had not been promoted because of problems they had in communicating with the public. A few were born in the United States. Some had lived here for many years. Interviews were given by teachers at the beginning of a ten month training program.

Mean scores, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and standard errors of measurement for the four reference groups.

Table 3 presents data for the tests taken by the four reference groups. They show the relative difficulty of the test for the groups (Mean and Standard Deviation), a comparison of one group with another (Means), the degree of consistency of measurement (r), and the limits within which an individual's test score may vary from his true score (SEm). Reliability coefficients were computed in various ways. Kudar-Richardson's formula #20 and the short cut

method for teacher made tests described by Harris were the most frequently used (Harris 1969, p. 144).

TABLE 3 - perfect score = 200

Group	Level	Number	Mean or (*Median)	SD	R	SEm
A	100	21	22*	17	.95	3.7
	200	20	75*	43	.95	9.5
	V200	23	76*	40	.95	8.74
	300	21	90*	42	.95	9.24
	400	34	133*	20		
	500	33	140*	21	.91	6.5
	600	30	149*	18		
B		23	123	44	.95	9.86
C		78	91	50	.98	6.14
D		93	156	33	.94	8.03

Validity study using Groups A, B and C

Some small studies have been done comparing students' scores on the interview with other means of evaluation. At the end of the Vocational 200 course in Group A, students took three tests that measured aural comprehension, (Lado 1957, Nixon 1970 and the Interview) as well as EPT A/B. Teachers and students ranked each student for conversational ability before the tests were administered. A comparison of students' scores in levels 400, 500 and 600 were also made on EPT G/H. Students in Group B took MTELP and the ELI Aural Test while students in C took TOEFL and were rated for their conversational ability by their teachers before the interviews were given. Correlations were computed by using the Rank Order Difference method and the Pearson Product Moment. Table 4 shows the results of the correlation studies. (Number in each sample appear in the parenthesis under each correlating figure.)

TABLE 4

Group	Level	Lado	Nixon	St.	T	EPT	TOEFL	ELI	MTELP
A	V200	.72 (15)	.80 (16)	77 (17)	.74 (11)	.85 (16)			
	400/500/600					.41 (62)			
B								.56 (23)	.67 (23)
C					.31 (78)		.60 (78)		

2. Using a revised experimental edition in an adaptation as a mass listening test.

Fifth-six items on the revised experimental interview were given to students similar to Group A above by the author at the end of each course. The interviews were first scored by the method used in the experimental test (four points per item) and then the short system recommended in the first edition(two points per item). Through item analysis, the best 50 revised items and then the 30 most discriminating items out of those 50 were selected. The tests were re-scored to determine correlations between items and scoring, as well as reliability, means, standard deviations and standard errors of measurement. Tables 5, 6 and 7 show the results of these studies.

TABLE 5
Medians on the 56 Revised Item Interview

Level	N	4-point scoring (perfect score=224) Median	R	2-point scoring (perfect score=112) Median	R
200	21	111	.94	50	.94
300	50	148		65	
400	32	174		76	
500/600	20	185		83	

TABLE 6
Means, standard deviations and standard errors of measurement for re-scored 50 items and 30 items. No.: 102 students in levels 300, 400 and 500/600. Group A.

Number of Items	Scoring System	Total Possible Points	R	Mean	SD	SEm
50	4 pt.	200	.96	145.06	29.89	5.99
50	2 pt.	100	.92	65.43	15.50	3.34
30	4 pt.	120	.94	81.82	19.37	4.72
30	2 pt.	60	.86	36.45	9.51	3.61

TABLE 7
Correlations between numbers of items and scoring systems. Number: 102 students in levels 300, 400 and 500/600 in Group A, interviewed at the end of each level.

50 with 30 items	4 point scoring	2 point scoring
	.93	.94
4 point scoring with	50 items	30 items
2 point scoring	.96	.97

3. Using the first edition 30 item option with the two point scoring system.

Description of reference group.

Students in three different federally funded job training programs in an Eastern day and night school. Ages ranged from 18 to 76. Students had many different language backgrounds. The students in one program were all Spanish speakers and the majority of the students in the other two programs were Spanish. However, there were large numbers of Koreans and Russians in the other programs as well as speakers of a wide variety of languages. Education levels in the students' own language varied from 0 to college and university completion. Years spent in the United States ranged from three days to ten or more years. Teachers administered the test at the beginning of the programs. Table 8 presents the date in the study.

TABLE 8 - perfect score=60

Number	Mean	SD	R	SEm
170	20.55	14.17	.92	4.00

4. Using part of the 50 items in the revised edition with the two point system of scoring (perfect score=63) in an adaption of the interview as a mass listening test.

Description of reference group.

Japanese high school and college students and Japanese English teachers in a special four week course at a California state university summer program. Ages ranged from 15 to 28. Years of English study ranged from 3 to 10. Interviews were administered by two teachers at the beginning of the program. Students took both the interview and the intermediate forms of the STEL test, (Best, 1976). Results of the study are in Table 9.

TABLE 9 - perfect score=62

Test	Number	Mean	SD	R	SEm	Correlation
101	63	32.08	14.43	.92	4.02	101 & STEL
STEL 1	63	30.89	10.96	.88	3.80	.86

Conclusion

It has taken many years for this interview to reach its present stage of readiness for a first edition. Much more research can be done to help students, employers and program planners. It is a

new idea, based on a controlled, picture oriented situation. It asks examiners to score only when appropriate information has been communicated. The examiner does not penalize for accent if the information is understandable in context. He accepts any variations in structure and/or grammar that educated native speakers would use in the context.

While the test is easy to administer, examiners must become familiar with its uniqueness. It is hoped that the interview will be useful to ESL programs, basic education programs, industry, and employment agencies in more objectively assessing foreign and second language speakers' oral levels of English proficiency.

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